

VZCZCXRO3107  
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHKL #0633/01 2151036  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 031036Z AUG 09  
FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3049  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 2811  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0651  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000633

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/03/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MY](#)

SUBJECT: ANTI-ISA DEMONSTRATIONS IN KUALA LUMPUR MEET WITH  
HEAVY GOM RESPONSE

Classified By: Political Counselor Brian D. McFeeters for reasons 1.4 b  
and d.

Summary

1. (SBU) On August 1, thousands of protestors assembled on the streets of downtown Kuala Lumpur calling for the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA), this despite extensive government warnings in the days leading up to the demonstration and police efforts to lock down the center of town and prevent protestors from assembling. Police used overwhelming force in the form of water canons and tear gas to disperse this first major street demonstration since the advent of the Najib administration. 589 were initially arrested; most of those were subsequently released by the authorities. The opposition has used the incident to portray the government as intolerant of dissent. The PM and government have emphasized that the ISA law is under review and that there were alternative venues for protest other than the streets. End Summary.

ISA focus of protest

2. (SBU) Downtown Kuala Lumpur became a battle zone on August 1 as police used tear gas and chemically laced water to disperse thousands of protestors calling for the repeal of the Internal Security Act (ISA). Acting PolCounselor and PolSpecialist observed the protest, the first major demonstration since Najib Tun Razak became Prime Minister in April 2009. It was organized by the NGO Abolish ISA Movement (AIM) and backed by the opposition coalition Peoples Alliance (PR). AIM has been in the forefront in urging the government to repeal the 1960 act, originally targeted at communist insurgents, that allows detention without trial. Opposition leaders and human rights activists maintain that the law has been used by the ruling National Front to stifle dissent in Malaysia. Currently around 17 people, a majority of them alleged members of JI, are detained under the Act.

Both sides lay down the gauntlet

3. (SBU) AIM initially called for 100,000 people to march to the national palace and hand over a memorandum urging the King to dissolve the Act. Over the past two weeks, the NGO and the PR had embarked on a major drive to bring out a large crowd, distributing fliers, using blogs and sending SMS messages. The fliers urged people to gather at three strategic places in the city; to prepare for tear gas and chemically laced water by bringing along towels, face masks, salt and bottled water, and in the case of students, to avoid carrying their student identifications. (Note: Students from

public universities are prohibited from participating in protests without written permission from university authorities. End Note.) Perhaps most significantly, on the eve of the demonstration the Islamic party PAS urged all of its members and supporters to converge on the downtown area. In the meantime, Police and Government officials made abundantly clear that they considered the planned protests illegal and would use all necessary force to disperse them. They noted that no permits had been issued for the demonstration and warned that stern action would be taken against anyone illegally assembling.

#### Pro-ISA group also joins fray

-----

14. (SBU) While AIM and the PR were preparing for the protest, a pro-ISA group closely associated with the ruling coalition's Pembela Negara Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations Council (Magaran), which claims to have 56 NGOs under its wing with over 100,000 members, gave AIM an ultimatum to cancel the rally or face a counter rally on the same day. However, Perkasa, another pro-government NGO, joined the fray and filed a police report on July 27 urging police to stop the rallies by AIM and Magaran as "they could lead to rioting."

#### Overwhelming Police response

-----

15. (C) On the morning of August 1, Acting PolCouns and PolSpecialist observed an exceptionally heavy police presence at points leading to the city center. Opposition sources

KUALA LUMP 00000633 002 OF 002

told us that the police were detaining anyone possessing any paraphernalia relating to the protest. Despite these measures, thousands of marchers materialized in the vicinity of the national mosque and approached the Merdeka square area, where police fired barrages of tear gas and dozens of water cannon trucks sprayed chemically laced water on the crowds (and numerous tourists and bystanders) without any warning. Several people were also severely beaten by the riot squad, including PAS Member of Parliament Dr. Hatta Ramli, an event captured on video. The march and subsequent skirmishes lasted for four hours, with 589 people reportedly arrested. The great majority of the marchers were Malays.

16. (C) Kuala Lumpur Criminal Investigation Department chief Ku Chin Wah told reporters that of those arrested 560 were released and the remaining 29, including Peoples Justice Party Vice president and de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim's lawyer Sivarasa Rasiah were remanded to face charges. Sivarasa was released on August 3 on police bail. Incidentally the pro-ISA group's plan to protest against AIM did not materialize. One of its leaders told reporters that they have decided to abide by the police directive not to organize a counter protest. However press sources told poloffs that the pro-ISA group cancelled their plans because very few people gathered to support their cause, and the feared clash of pro and anti-ISA groups did not materialize.

#### Government, Opposition reactions

-----

17. (SBU) Interestingly, among the ruling coalition partners, only United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leaders condemned the protest. PM Najib called the ISA-linked demonstrations "unnecessary" since the government was in the process of reviewing the Act. Home Minister Hishamuddin told reporters August 2 that amendments to the Act "that will not compromise national security" would be tabled in the next session of Parliament. However, Minister in the PM's Department Nazri Abdul Aziz condemned the opposition parties for organizing the protest and added that "as long as the BN rules the laws stays." Government owned media downplayed the protest claiming that only 5,000 people took part (Note. We

estimated that higher estimates of 20,000 to 30,000 were probably more accurate. End Note.), praised police for being "highly professional" and lamented the "inconvenience caused" by the protest to businesses and the people in general.

18. (SBU) Opposition leaders condemned the "high handed and highly unprofessional conduct" of the police, describing them as "puppets of the UMNO elite." Anwar Ibrahim maintained that the dispersal of the demonstrators proved that the Government "does not tolerate dissent." Democratic Action Party (DAP) senior advisor Lim Kit Siang urged the police to concentrate on efforts to bring down the increasing crime rate in the country rather than on "peaceful, patriotic advocates for abolition of ISA." PAS Vice President Mahfouz Omar stated that police have never adhered to standard operating procedure when opposition rallies are involved and condemned the violent action against the peaceful protestors.  
KEITH